

## *TWO EARLY RESETTLEMENT SCHEMES IN BARRA*

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The aspect of rural settlement in the Outer Hebrides has been much altered by various land settlement schemes during the late nineteenth, and especially during the twentieth centuries. These have generally been encouraged or initiated and financed by Government bodies such as the former Board of Agriculture (now Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland) and the Congested Districts Board. Most of the schemes have subsequently been regulated by the former Crofters Commission and its successor of 1911, the Scottish Land Court.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, the Department of Agriculture has laid out new crofting townships on former farms belonging to private proprietors; in other cases the Department itself has become the proprietor by compulsory purchase or otherwise. Such resettlement schemes, however, were preceded by some which were initiated wholly by private proprietors. Amongst the earliest were those which comprised the fishermen's holdings of Bentangaval and Garrygall in the island of Barra. Set up in 1883, these schemes quickly became abortive as their original *raison-d'être* proved ephemeral. The result to-day is a decadent system of agricultural holdings too small for efficient use of available land, and too small to support the tenants' families.

The physical environment in Barra is poor, consisting of large areas of eroded gneiss and meagre pasture with only small peripheral areas of cultivated land. This has always meant that only a poor living could be obtained from agriculture. By the late eighteenth century with the cessation of warfare epidemics, increase in population could not be supported solely from the land. Until the middle of the next century, fishing, kelp manufacture and the widespread cultivation of the potato in turn provided subsidiary sources of food or income. As each

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failed, the close balance between subsistence and famine in Barra was disrupted, and many people became destitute. Some townships were cleared to make way for more profitable large farms. Often this resulted in further land pressure and the displaced people moved into the adjacent townships, in which holdings became subdivided to accommodate them; the alternative was to emigrate to the Lowlands of Scotland, or overseas.

Through the second half of the nineteenth century in Barra, Harris and Lewis, the contribution of fishing, both subsistence and commercial, again helped to give rise to, and support an increasing population. By the 1880's, side by side with large empty areas under single-tenant farms, there were a few crofting townships into which the majority of the population was crowded. The original crofter holdings had become much subdivided as population increased, and in addition there were more cottars and squatters with no legal land holdings. Quite illegally they made use of tenants' land to graze cattle and sheep and to cultivate patches of potatoes and corn. For this privilege they sometimes paid rent in cash or labour, but often no rent passed at all. The bare living obtained from the land for most families was being supplemented by reliance on part-time fishing. At this period the fishing industry in Barra was being conducted mainly by full-time fishermen from the East Coast of Scotland. Fish was caught, and salted, dried or cured, for export to the expanding markets of Eastern Europe. Local men and women were employed on the boats and on the shore, and some even followed the fishing, seasonally, to the East Coast. The wages for this made possible the purchase of imported food which was increasingly difficult to produce in sufficient quantity in overpopulated Barra.

This extra contribution from fishing however only increased the overpopulation and land congestion, and by the 1880's, both tenants and cottars in the agricultural townships were clamouring for land.<sup>2</sup> In the three townships of Glen, Kentangaval and Tangusdale around Castle Bay, there were in 1883, 66 legal tenants and 65 cottars. Forty-five of these petitioned the proprietrix of the island, Lady Emily Gordon Cathcart, for more land. They suggested that the island of Watersay to the south of Barra, and at that time part of a large farm, should be settled by a crofter population. But Lady Cathcart turned down this proposal on several issues. Her main objection was that Barra could never be wholly an agricultural

island and she saw little point in establishing yet another community of landholders who would in time become part-agriculturalists and part-fishers. Instead she stressed that in order to be successful, agriculture and fishing had to be separated as much as possible. Fishing ought to be a full-time occupation pursued along the lines of the East Coast fishermen who came from non-agricultural villages. She was trying every means to encourage the local development of fishing, centred on the port of Castlebay, as a source of livelihood for landless families. Already, a hotel for dealers, several shops and a school had been built by the proprietrix in Castlebay, and she had encouraged the erection of piers, curing stations, and the extension of telegraphic communication with mainland markets. At the same time she realised that it would be difficult for the families of landless fishermen to obtain potatoes and milk, so from 1883 onwards, she proposed several land resettlement schemes for small fishermen's holdings. The first two comprised the hilly peninsulas and surrounding fringes of Bentangaval and Garrygall, which at that time belonged to the farms of Watersay and Eoligarry to the south and north respectively (see Fig. 1). These were offered to cottar-fishermen living in the congested townships around Castlebay, with the aim of providing each family with sufficient land on which to grow potatoes for food, and winter fodder and grass for a cow's milk. In addition each family was to share a small supplementary income from a Club sheep stock. In no way were the holdings intended to be large enough to detract from the tenant's main occupation in fishing, and Lady Cathcart suggested that no houses be built on Bentangaval or Garrygall. Instead, rented house stances were offered in Castlebay itself, enabling the fishermen to be close to port. After these schemes, came several others with the same purpose in mind, for instance, Bruernish and Leanish. In addition, there were other schemes of an entirely different nature; these were concerned with the provision of adequately-sized agricultural holdings to enable people to make a full-time living from the land, for example, in Allasdale, paralleled by later resettlement schemes, e.g. Northbay in 1901.

The hill of Bentangaval amounted to about 1750 acres, of which some 28 acres were reckoned to be potential "arable". Of the original 45 shares which were offered, only 35 were taken up, and indeed, in default of enough cottar-fishermen applying for holdings, some were rented by tenants of the

surrounding crofting townships of Glen, Kentangaval and Tangusdale. So even at the start, the scheme had to be modified in its original purpose. Each tenant was allowed one share

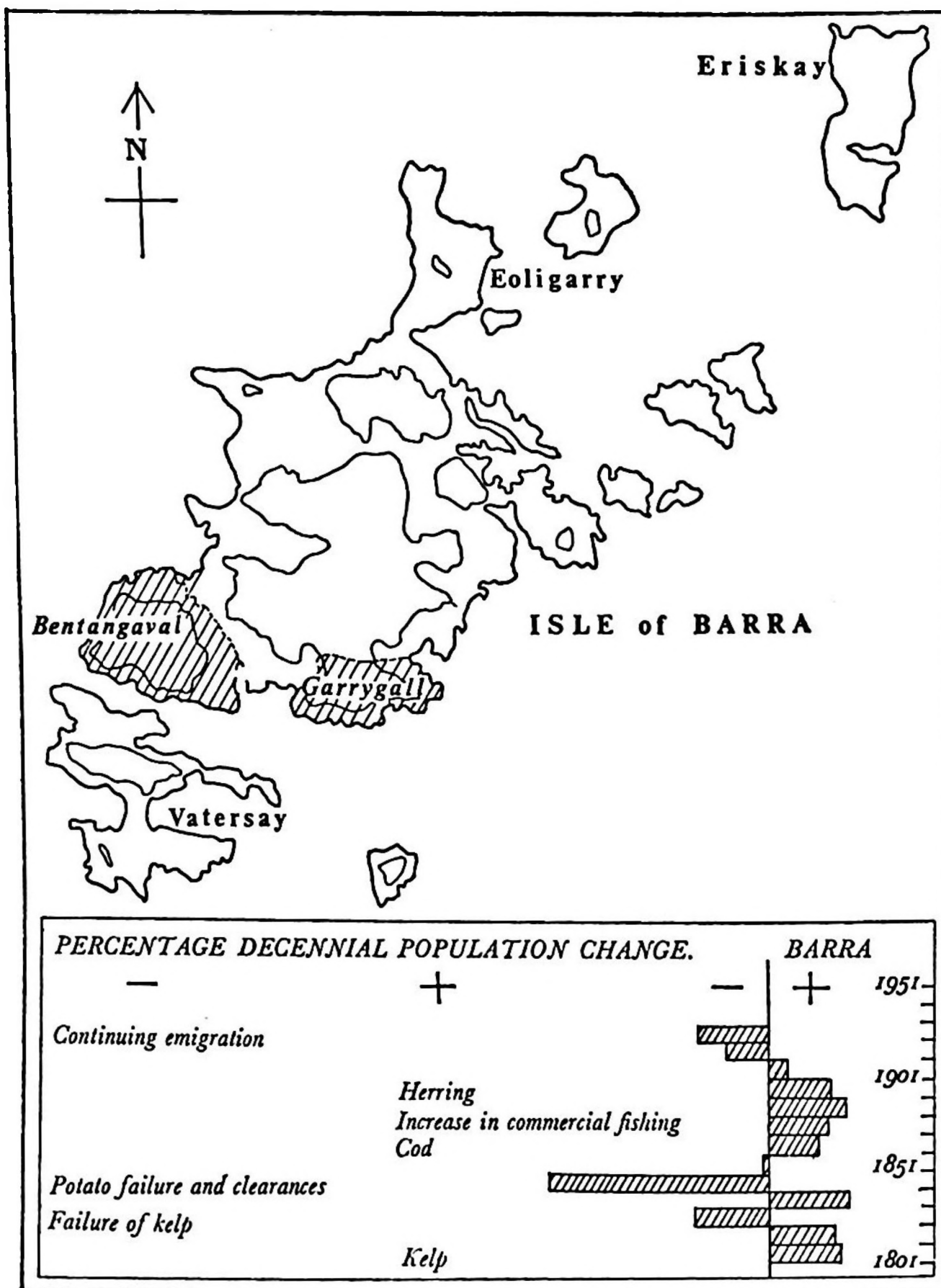


FIG. 1

in the new township which permitted him to graze a cow and a young beast, as well as having his share of seven sheep in a township Club stock. His share in the arable area gave him just under

an acre in which to cultivate potatoes and hay. The so-called "arable" areas were in two parts known as East and West Bentangaval (see Fig. 2) in which there were respectively 17 and 18 shares. East Bentangaval consisted of a bench round Loch Beag with poor rocky soils, and West Bentangaval had peaty-loamy soils close to the Atlantic shores, several miles from Castlebay. Each share consisted of several small and scattered pieces of relatively better or poorer land. None of the tenants, however, took up house stances in Castlebay but continued to reside in the surrounding townships. There was still, therefore partial attachment to the land, contrary to Lady Gordon Cathcart's wish for full-time fishermen. There was no fence separating Bentangaval from the other townships, and since the byres for the Bentangaval stock were still in fact in these townships, the stock fed from the Glen, Kentangaval and Tangusdale crofts in winter, and the stock of the latter roamed Ben Tangaval in summer. Thus apart from some additional grazing the land situation in the crofting townships had not changed very much in the years following the scheme's initiation in 1883. Moreover, already by 1890, the livelihood to be obtained from fishing was becoming precarious. The boom of 1889 in which the maximum number of 571 boats<sup>3</sup> was fishing in the Barra District (which included S. Uist) was followed by fluctuations in numbers of boats and sizes of catch. And so many of the tenants became unable to pay their rents, let alone pay for their share in the Club sheep stock (and this despite the fact that the Club stock had only one-third of the numbers of sheep grazed on the Ben when it was part of the Watersay tack or farm). By 1892, 25 out of the 35 tenants were in debt to the tune of £772, or £22.11.0 each, on average. They applied to the Fair Rents Commission for revised rents. Arrears were reduced and rents lowered from £3.10.0 to £2.5.0. But matters scarcely improved with continuing fluctuations in fishing and less than a decade after its inception, the idea of forming fishermen's holdings with houses near the port of Castlebay was rapidly becoming out of date. The Census of 1891<sup>4</sup> mentions only 16 households in Castlebay whilst the crofting townships of Glen had 65 and Kentangaval 53. In these latter townships, part-time livelihood from fishing was sporadically obtained on east coast boats up until World War I. But the latter interrupted the Eastern European markets for Hebridean produce and fishing in Barra rapidly declined. Decreasing numbers of boats and men were employed up to World War II



since when, Barra, with its port of Castlebay, has been of minor importance in the British fishing industry, sheltering only the occasional foreign trawler besides a few local lobster boats. A recent attempt by the Scottish Home Department to re-suscitate the fishing industry of the Outer Hebrides is discussed in note 8.

So, as the importance of income from fishing declined, the 35 holdings of Bentangaval scarcely ever served their original purpose: nor could they prove successful agricultural holdings by their very nature. The erection of a fence between Bentangaval and the surrounding townships in 1906-7, and the raising of the souming of each share to 1 horse, 1 cow and 10 sheep were attempts to increase the agricultural utilisation of the land. Later, another fence was erected around East Bentangaval to separate the arable areas from the grazing, and still more recently, a further one was erected around West Bentangaval. Several of the tenants have built houses in Bentangaval itself. But only the part of East Bentangaval around Loch Beag and the small area to the west of it are now cultivated. And with the exception of one croft recently consolidated and fenced, and of another consolidated though unfenced, the arable is still held in patches. Of the original 35 tenancies, (see Fig. 2*a*), there are at present, by amalgamation 31, of which 10 are held by tenants now living in Bentangaval itself; 16 are held by tenants living outside Bentangaval but still in other parts of Barra; 4 are held by tenants living outside Barra altogether and are unworked; and one is vacant. In addition there are four feu<sup>5</sup> houses without grazing or cultivation rights.

Only 8½ acres of arable land in the township are used for the production of potatoes and winter fodder, and of the township's soum or stint of 35 cows, there are at present only 4. Again, only four of the original holdings have a fraction of an acre worked for potatoes, corn and hay, and are stocked with a cow and a score or so of ewes (see Fig. 2*b*). These four tenants have houses on Bentangaval itself, two being retired Merchant Navymen whose families are grown-up and away from the island. The other two tenants work most of the year on the mainland, while their wives tend the land. Six other holdings are held by tenants living in Bentangaval. Three are cultivated for potatoes and the tenants keep a few sheep—all these tenants are over 65 years of age. Two holdings are worked only for potatoes, and one is unofficially sublet to one of the retired

Merchant Navymen. Apart from one holding which is vacant, and 4 held by tenants residing outside Barra and which are at present unworked, the remaining 16 holdings are held by tenants living in other parts of the island, the services centre and port of Castlebay, and the crofting townships of Glen, Kentangaval and Tangusdale. Three of these 16 tenants live on feus in nearby Kentangaval, and sometimes cultivate a few patches of potatoes and keep a few sheep. None of the other 13 holdings is cultivated or stocked with cattle; they are utilised entirely as sheep grazing. In the case of Kentangaval and Tangusdale tenants, the Ben forms supplementary grazing for their own stock of sheep. For other tenants in Castlebay, it provides an additional source of income for very little outlay except an occasional day's fencing, shearing or dipping. There is no longer a township herdsman as there was in the earlier days, to look after the Club stock. Each tenant shepherds his own tiny flock of sheep, or else leaves them to fend for themselves. The latter is more frequent, and shows its effects in lambing percentages around or under 50 per cent. The soum for each share, converted into numbers of sheep (i.e. ewes) is 25. For the 35 shares this gives a total of 875 ewes. An "equivalence" <sup>6</sup> of 280 ewes belongs to tenants living in Bentangaval and to some of those living in the township outside. In addition there is an indeterminate number comprising parts of flocks belonging to tenants living in other townships. However it is reasonable to assume that not only is Bentangaval being under-utilised or under-stocked, but in addition, due to the preponderance of sheep over cattle, pasture quality is deteriorating except in the one sweet area to which most of the sheep flock. This is the close green sward covering the former cultivation rigs of the abandoned township of Gortein overlooking the Sound of Vatersay. Only a fraction of the arable land is being utilised and more and more of it is also reverting to poor pasture. The original aim, then, of providing potatoes and milk for families of fishermen living in Castlebay, has resulted to-day in a system of units too small for efficient agricultural use. In fact, both potatoes and bottled milk are to be seen being taken off the thrice-weekly steamer from Oban. Although mostly used in the non-agricultural area of Castlebay, they are also to be found in Bentangaval households.

The resumption of Bentangaval for fishermen-cottars and crofters west of Castlebay, was paralleled on the east by that of Garrygall. The hill and surrounding valleys of Garrygall

amounted to 970 acres of which 59 were potentially "arable". Lady Gordon Cathcart offered to share it amongst 40 heads of families connected with fishing. The 40 shares were all taken

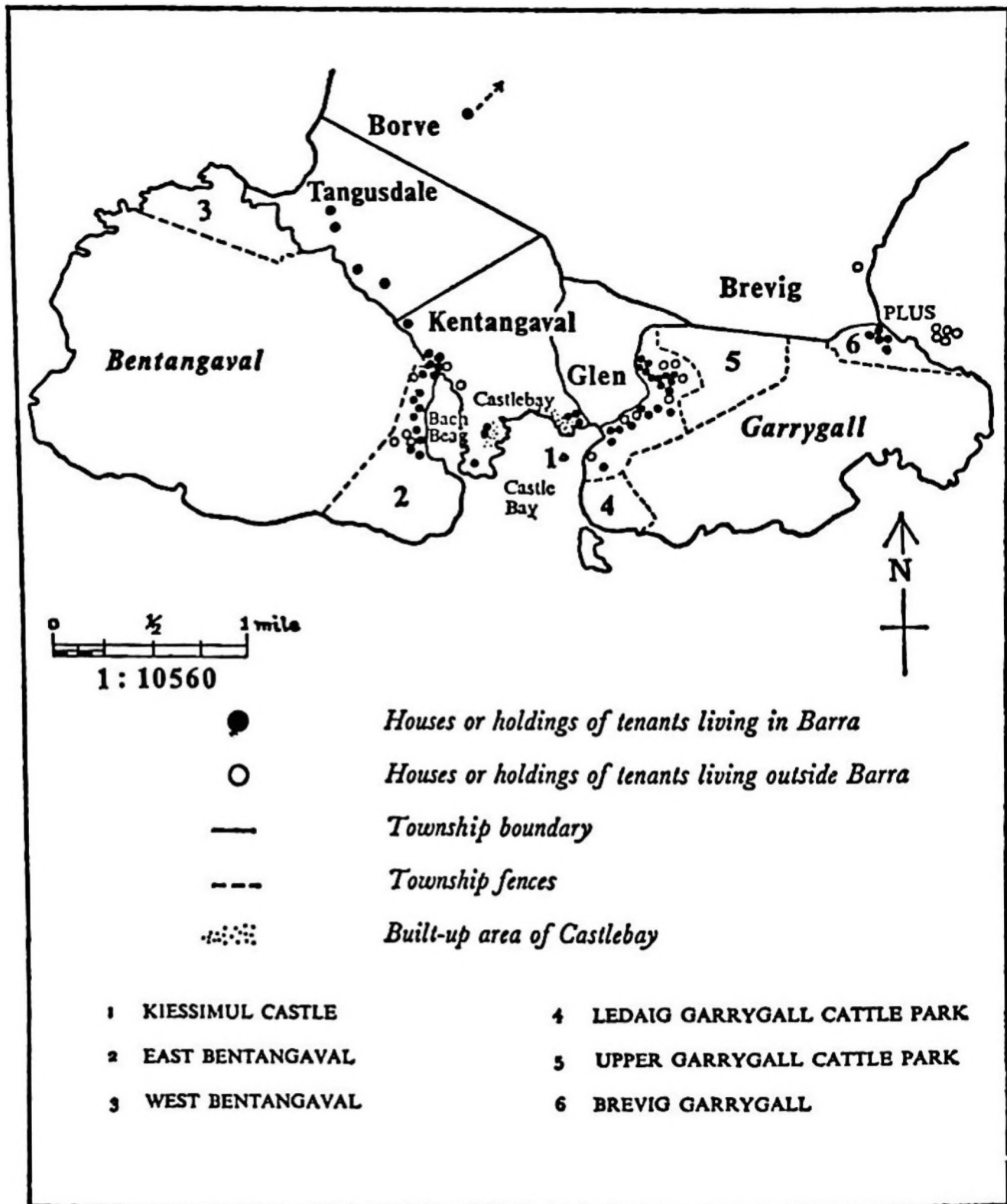


FIG. 2a

up by families from Glen, Brevig and from the island of Mingulay. The same purpose was pursued, the arable share of each tenant being slightly larger than in Bantangaval, and on better quality land on the alluvial sides of the streams Allt a Ghlinn, Allt Alasdair and their tributaries. Each tenant had a share amounting to a cow, a calf and 8 sheep in the Club stock.



Houses were again to be in Castlebay. The inbye land was divided into three portions, Ledaig Garrygall (14 shares), Upper Garrygall (14 shares) and Brevig Garrygall (12 shares).

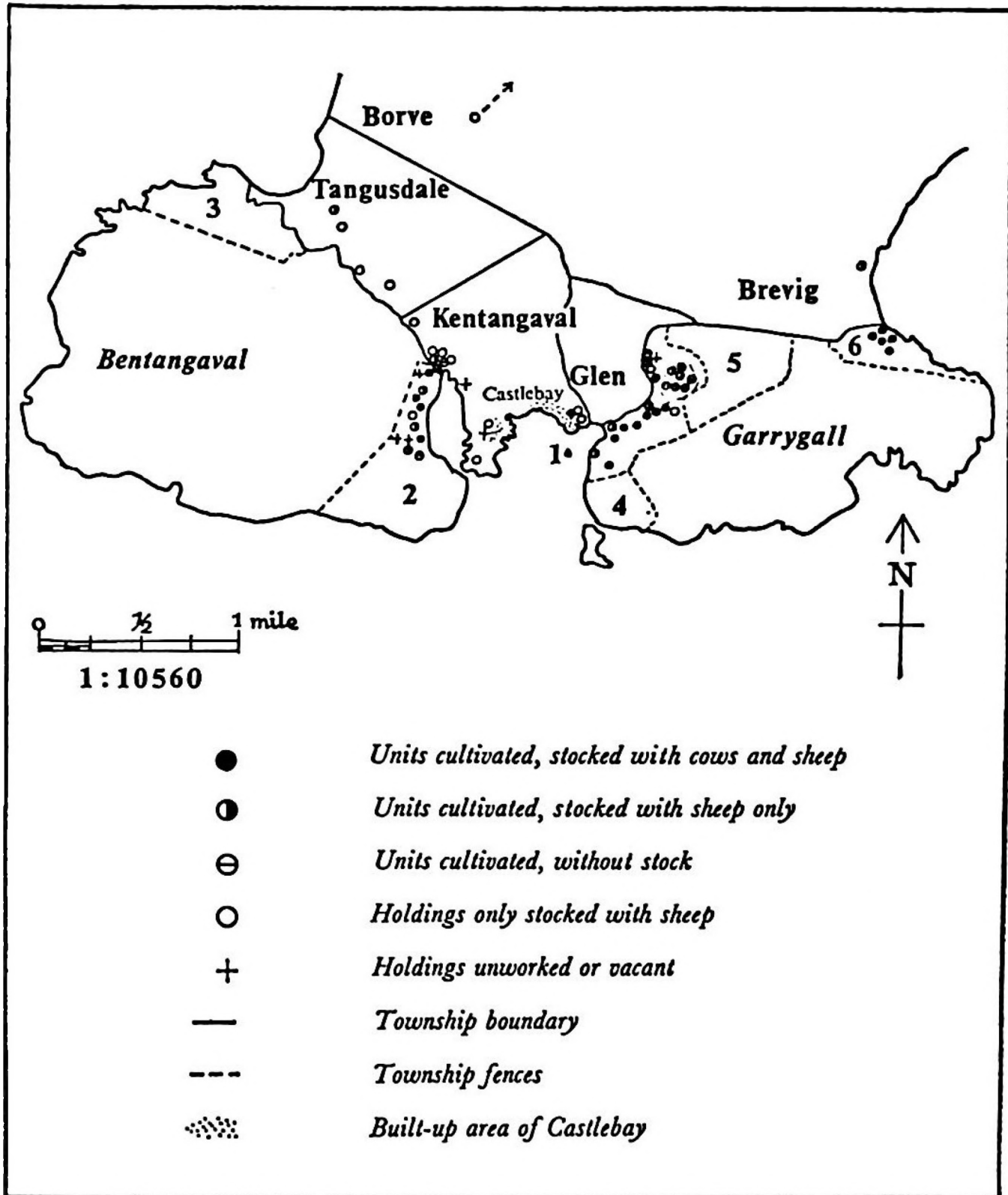


FIG. 2b

In the first two, each tenant had 9 patches in order again to share good and bad land. The third, Brevig Garrygall, was first divided into an arable part close to the sea, and each of the twelve tenants had one single, consolidated patch or lot in this area for growing potatoes. Another area was fenced off for hay and tethered grazing, and later another for potatoes. As in

Bentangaval, so in Garrygall, most of the tenants in 1891 applied for Fair Rents, with similar reductions. But the subsequent development of Garrygall has been slightly different from that of Bentangaval. In 1939, the tenants of Ledaig and Upper Garrygall decided to consolidate their pieces of arable land. First of all two cattle parks were fenced off, one for Ledaig and one for Upper Garrygall (see Fig. 2a). Then holdings for cultivation were unofficially lotted or consolidated into rectangular strips running up the valley side of Allt a Ghlinn and its tributary. This arrangement still holds to-day, and some of the consolidated holdings are wholly, others partially, fenced off. Many of the tenants now have houses on their consolidated lots. Thus this area has taken on something of the appearance of a crofting township.

Taking Ledaig and Upper Garrygall as *Glen Garrygall*, of the 28 tenancies formed in 1883, there are still 28, of which 16 are held by tenants living in Garrygall; 4 are held by tenants living in other parts of Barra; 7 are tenanted by people living outside Barra who unofficially sublet their crofts to tenants on the island; and one is vacant. There are, however, only 24 agriculturally operative units.<sup>7</sup> From Fig. 2b it is seen that 11 of these are cultivated and stocked with both cattle and sheep. Where amalgamation has taken place officially or unofficially, more than one cow is even kept. Seven units are cultivated for potatoes and used as sheep grazing; 2 are worked only for potatoes with no stock kept; 3 are used solely as sheep grazing and one is vacant. Of the sheep soum of 700 ewes for Glen Garrygall the equivalent of 351 sheep is grazed in the township. On the whole the land is being put to greater use in Glen Garrygall than in Bentangaval, though still only half of the units are being utilised for their original purpose of providing milk and potatoes, again mostly by older folk or the wives of men away at sea or on the mainland. In *Brevig Garrygall*, only the first block of land to be enclosed is now utilised for cultivation. Of the original 12 tenancies there are now 11, of which 5 are held by people living outside Barra altogether and one living in Brevig to the north. The 5 held by absentee tenants are sublet to the remaining tenants. All but one of the resultant six units are worked for potatoes and hay and keep cattle and sheep, the remaining one having no cow. But each of the tenants is over 65 years of age.

Table I illustrates the greater degree of land utilisation in Garrygall than in Bentangaval as a whole. But neither

compares very favourably with the surrounding agricultural townships whose population and land problems they were designed to alleviate. In the latter townships, over two-thirds of the units are cultivated and stocked with more than half their soum. Corresponding with these larger consolidated

TABLE I

*Summary of the agricultural situation in the townships of Bentangaval and Garrygall, as compared with Kentangaval and Tangusdale*

Township	Tenancies	Units	A	B	C	D	E
<b>BENTANGAVAL</b>							
Holdings rented by tenants living							
(i) in Bentangaval . . . . .	13	12	4	3	2	0	3
(ii) on non-agricultural feus in Barra or furth . . . . .	8	8	0	3	1	3	2
(iii) in other crofting townships of Barra . . . . .	10	9	0	0	1	7	0
<hr/>							
Total Bentangaval . . . . .	31	29	4	6	4	10	5
<b>GARRYGALL</b>							
"Glen" Garrygall . . . . .	28	24	11	7	2	3	1
"Brevig" Garrygall . . . . .	11	6	5*	1	0	0	0
<hr/>							
Total Garrygall . . . . .	39	30	16	8	2	3	1
Kentangaval . . . . .	17	13	11	0	2	0	0
Tangusdale . . . . .	14	13	9	1	1	2†	0

\* Including one worked by tenant in Brevig, Barra.

† Including one used as sheep grazing by tenant in Borge, Barra.

A. Agriculture Units cultivated and stocked with cows and sheep.

B. Agriculture Units cultivated and stocked with sheep.

C. Agriculture Units cultivated, but with no stock.

D. Holdings only stocked with sheep.

E. Holdings unworked or vacant.

holdings in Kentangaval and Tangusdale, is their greater ability to support the families belonging to them, as is demonstrated in Table II.

From Table II, Bentangaval and Garrygall have as many or more people living and working away from home as live there, especially when those of working age (i.e. 15 to 64 years) are considered, but the reverse is true of the crofting townships of Kentangaval and Tangusdale. This is to be expected since the original occupation of fishing has declined. No alternative

source of employment has arisen to take its place, such as the Harris Tweed weaving industry of Lewis. Many of the men join the Merchant Navy; others find casual employment in civil engineering and other public works on the mainland. Many single women of working age find domestic work on the mainland. In 1957, of the men of working age in Bentangaval itself only one spent his time looking after his holding, but was not fully occupied—he was a retired Merchant Navyman. Another took work as and when it became available, and the other three tenants were all employed in non-agricultural occupations. Likewise in Garrygall, there were no “full-time”

TABLE II

*Numbers of people living and working at home and away from the townships of Bentangaval and Garrygall, as compared with Kentangaval and Tangusdale*

Township	Total population (including cottars and feuars)		Total (15-64 years)	
	At home	Away	At home	Away
Bentangaval	49	46	19	44
Garrygall	84	78	48	68
Kentangaval	94	23	40	23
Tangusdale	40	28	19	27

agriculturalists. Three tenants had regular employment, three had sporadic work and two were in non-agricultural full-time employment.

In both Bentangaval and Garrygall then, the land is under-utilised. Especially in Garrygall is it capable of improvement and it could carry more stock. Neither of these two settlements can support its population. But the present agrarian structure of excessively small land holdings and common grazings, in which many shareholders take little interest, makes improvement difficult. Lady Gordon Cathcart's policy at the time was a wise one. The establishment of such tiny holdings was intended to encourage the development of full-time fishing. This has failed however, and the scheme announced in 1959 by the Scottish Home Department<sup>8</sup> for the revival of Outer Hebridean fishing, is unlikely to produce fishermen in sufficient numbers to resuscitate such settlements. Already almost all of the tenants have other employment or else live away from Barra, and a degree of unofficial reorganisation of the land has already taken place. Both townships are areas in which the present Crofters Commission could well use its powers of reorganisation, to provide, under the Crofters Act of 1961,<sup>9</sup>

a smaller number of larger holdings which would be more attractive to tenants interested in proper agricultural management, whilst non-landholding house feus would be granted to dispossessed landholding tenants. Critics would at once point out that such a system of redistribution of land would be undesirable in an area of few alternative employment opportunities for dispossessed tenants. But as has already been illustrated, there are at present no tenants being fully employed agriculturally, in either Bentangaval or Garrygall. The redistribution of the holdings into adequately-sized units would more likely encourage better utilisation of the land, and perhaps, progressive improvement. At least a few men and their families would have the opportunity of staying in Barra to make a living solely from the land by the sale of cattle, sheep and wool, as well as of milk and potatoes. These would be required not only by the non-agricultural households on feus in the townships, and in the services centre and port of Castlebay, but also by the increasing number of holidaymakers. The expansion of the holiday industry in Barra and the other Hebrides, follows recent similar trends on the adjacent West Highland mainland of Scotland, and further emphasises the need for increased local food production in the Hebrides generally. One method of effecting this is the economic reorganisation and improvement of archaic patterns of landholdings such as those of Bentangaval and Garrygall. The original reasons for such patterns are no longer valid economically or sociologically although admirable in the time and mind of Lady Gordon Cathcart.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> The Crofters (Scotland) Act of 1955 reconstituted the Crofters Commission. Under the more recent Crofters (Scotland) Act, 1961, 9810 Eliz. 2 Ch. 58, amendments to the 1955 Act are made and further powers given to "make fresh provision with respect to the reorganisation, development and regulation of crofting in the crofting Counties of Scotland".
- <sup>2</sup> Evidence by Her Majesty's Commissioners of Enquiry into the conditions of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. (Napier Commission) 1884 Vol. I, pp. 643-98.
- <sup>3</sup> Fishery Board Reports. Ninth Report 1890, Appendix V.
- <sup>4</sup> Unpublished Census of Scotland enumeration schedules, . . . New Register House, Edinburgh.
- <sup>5</sup> A "feu" is a Scottish legal term with no English equivalence, for a lease of land granted in perpetuity by one party to another with certain conditions attached. In the connection here, that is, in the crofting



- counties, the relevant point is that the feuar, unlike the crofter tenant has no legal right to shares in arable land or common pasture.
- <sup>6</sup> Each crofter tenant by his share or shares in the township is permitted to keep a certain proportion or soun of the total township stock. For example in Bentangaval each share entitles the tenant to hold 1 horse, 1 cow and 10 sheep. By "equivalence", horses, cows and sheep may be interchanged according to the particular township equivalence. In this case, 2 cows or 10 sheep may be substituted for 1 horse. So each tenant's soun in sheep equivalence amounts to 25 sheep.
  - <sup>7</sup> An agriculturally operative unit may be considered as a holding or number of holdings cultivated and stocked by one tenant. He may be the legal tenant of all, or sublet some of the holdings.
  - <sup>8</sup> Scottish Home Department Fisheries Training Scheme. For details see Crofters Commission Report 1959, Cmd. 9096. Under this scheme, two fishing boats have arrived in Lewis, and in September 1961, the Magdalena CY 1, the first herring ring-net boat to be built for a Barra crew under the Fisheries Training Scheme, arrived in Castlebay. The owners are two brothers from a holding in Ledaig Garrygall who earlier returned from the Merchant Navy to join the Training Scheme. The rest of the crew is composed of their father and two other brothers at present engaged in lobster fishing from the port. (*The Oban Times*, 23.9.61.)
  - <sup>9</sup> Crofters (Scotland) Act 1961. See 1.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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